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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/13/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [LE](#) [VT](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: JESUIT SCHOLAR DISCUSSES CHRISTIAN SUPPORT FOR
AOUN, ISRAEL, HOLY SEE ROLE

CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher Sandrolini, Deputy Chief of Mission,
EXEC, State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. A Beirut-based Jesuit scholar, Father Samir, shared his view of the situation in Lebanon, including the attachment Christians there feel for General Aoun. Samir supports Siniora and a strong US role, is critical of Israel, and feels the Holy See will continue to work through the Patriarch (rather than directly) in Lebanon. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) DCM and poloff discussed Lebanon December 11 with Father Samir Khalil Samir, a scholar at St. Joseph University in Beirut and the Pontifical Institute of Islamic and Arab Studies in Rome. Fr. Samir, well known to post and reportedly admired by the pope, is an Egyptian Jesuit who has lived in Lebanon for many years and who writes regularly in the Catholic press on topics relating to Islam and Christianity.

¶3. (C) Following are key points from the conversation:

--Samir told us he is the only Christian in his university who doesn't favor General Aoun, whom he thinks is driven purely by ambition to become president. Christians revere Aoun as war hero who is not corrupt; they follow him, but otherwise do not have an agenda. Samir was not optimistic about weaning Christian support away from Aoun.

-- Samir, who opposed the Iraq war from the beginning, believes the US has an important role in Lebanon. He supports our desire to bolster the Siniora government, which he thinks has done a good job. As to charges that it is corrupt, Samir thinks it no more so than other Lebanese governments.

-- Samir was very critical of Israel for its role in this summer's conflict. More broadly, while he condemns acts of terrorism against Israel, Samir believes that the longstanding Israeli occupation of Palestinian areas is at the heart of Middle Eastern instability. Lebanese think the United States accepts the Israeli occupation as simply a fact of life, but for Arabs the occupation is a constant provocation and a bitter affliction that is renewed daily.

-- the issue of She'baa Farms is not important in itself, just a convenient pretext for Hezbollah and Syria; from Samir's perspective Israel should remove the pretext by finding a way to cede the land.

-- the Holy See won't want to go public via its nuncio in Beirut (Archbishop Gatti), and will prefer to work only through Patriarch Sfeir; this is its usual practice everywhere, and Lebanon's politics are especially complicated. Samir had not heard of Holy See plans to send a special envoy to Lebanon (septel).

¶4. (SBU) Comment: Fr. Samir was in town briefly to preside at the dissertation defense of one of his American students. He

will return to Rome in February and March to work on a conference he is helping to sponsor on Islamic cultural achievements. We will continue to seek him out.

ROONEY